

Sermon, February 17, 2008, The Second Sunday of Lent  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

The story of Nicodemus' clandestine meeting with Jesus and the important message within his timid conversion is overshadowed by what is probably the most quoted verse of the Bible: John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world....*"

Anyone who has watched a football or baseball game on television has no doubt seen *that person* in the stands holding up a hand lettered sign reading "John 3:16" as the TV camera scans the crowd.

I was just a boy, watching a "Game of the Week" baseball game when I first saw "the sign," left the game to get my Bible and look up the verse. Looking back, I can admit I experienced something of a small conversion, more of an early awakening perhaps. It became the first Bible verse I committed to memory. I watched for *the sign* during other televised games; later, there were other signs.

Truthfully, I was fairly interested in why someone would go to the trouble to perhaps risk being publicly chastised, even held in suspicion; subject to persecution and great peril, for making a very public evangelistic display. Who are they and what is their message, other than the verse at hand?

You have to admit: it's a fairly effective way to get a message out to a lot of people without making a lot of unnecessary noise and show. That brave yet shy soul(s) reaches a lot of people with their quiet and low-tech communication style still today, and I wonder if there are other folks who are stirred from their resting place (life as it was) as a result of their effort?

God has subtle ways of finding and reaching people who could be considered out of reach. Nicodemus is one such example of someone who began to question the signs Jesus was showing and he took a great risk to seek him out. Afraid of being discovered, Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night and was exposed to a great light....the light of the world.

Jesus had been performing "*many miraculous signs during the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, and many people began to trust him*" (John 2:22). Nicodemus was one of those beginning to sense a conversion of trust. He could be caught seeing Jesus during the day, it was just too risky for both of them to be seen together. The Jewish high court of which Nicodemus was a member was already busy plotting to do away with Jesus. Nicodemus had to act fast, but very carefully. So he chose to go see Jesus under the cover of darkness. In their nocturnal conversation Jesus challenged Nicodemus to change his life to a new way and he came away with a whole new way of understanding himself and God:

*"Jesus, thank you for allowing me to come see you, especially so late in the day. I know you'll agree it would not be good for either of us to be seen together. The other*

*members of the high council are really concerned about the power you seem to have over the people. More and more of us are following you....seeking you out. The leaders are beginning to plot ways to do away with you, and I'm concerned they will do just that. I come myself at great risk. I could lose everything, even my very life if they knew I was talking with you. My own family would not understand why I went looking for you. I do not really understand this power you seem to have over me, myself. My life was fine, just the way it was.*

*I have a loving family, power, money, a fine home, education, security and respect. Now I find myself sneaking away in the dark of night, leaving all that behind just to get to know you better, to learn more about you. I've been talking with some of your followers and some who are considering following you, we all know in our hearts that God has sent you to teach us. You have done many great things, signs that God is with you. The people who have found you and seen you, been near you say they are different afterwards; somehow changed for good. I think I want my life to be different too, but I'm afraid. I'm so confused."*

*"Nicodemus my friend, slow down, you are safe here with me. It is late and the others have gone home, but it is never too late to come to me. Those that remain here with me are asleep for this day is finished. We have time to talk. You are safe with me, always.*

*Nicodemus, you are sensing the same feelings as all the others. They have come to know, partly from me, mostly from their own desire, that there is more to living life well than just following strict religious rules and fearing the Father will punish them if they do otherwise. Our God never intended such things. No one has heard me say they are condemned. God's people are tired of the old way. They are not fulfilled. Their hearts know and seek more. This is why I Am here, and why you come this night, as well.*

*Nicodemus, the Father loves us as children...his grace and goodness is our eternal home, not this earth. We live in this flesh for only a short time. But I want the people to know they can live with God and by God anytime, and anywhere, but one has live as flesh (water) **and** Spirit to do so. That is my message today.*

*See the large man sleeping over there? I call him Peter, "the Rock." He is very much of this earth, rock solid, but he is also tender, he lives in his heart, by the Spirit. Yet, he fails; soon he will fail me greatly even though he will deny that is possible. We all make mistakes, but we can all return to God's loving kindness. Knowing that creates the great Spirit of love in one's life of which I speak.*

*You look confused again, Nicodemus. Think of it like this: we humans can reproduce other humans and a new life begins. This Spirit I speak of is also a part of our human life, only it is most often set aside for things of this world, until the Spirit no longer recognized as part of human life. The Spirit remains in one's heart, yet gone from their daily life. They must know the Spirit again and renew it within their heart. Its like a re-birth, a renewal of one's Spirit."*

*"That's what confuses me Jesus, how on earth can one be "born again? That's impossible. Are you saying we must go back into our mother's womb? Some are saying that's crazy talk! That's impossible!"*

*“Yes, it is a difficult teaching, it’s like chasing the wind; you cannot see it coming or going so you cannot follow it. We hear the wind. We sense its power over us, yet we cannot hold it in our hands. It’s there, but it is not. It’s the same with trying to explain a life in the Spirit.”*

*“That doesn’t help at all Jesus, this is impossible to understand. Maybe I had better leave.”*

*“No wait, you are correct, Nicodemus. You, are a learned and respected Jewish teacher. Yet you do not understand, nor will many others understand through the ages. That is fine. We will go on, the others and I now, and many more through the ages. We will tell what we know and have seen. Yet you and others will not believe us....at first.*

*Once you are able to separate earthly things from heavenly things you will understand. Only have I seen both. I came down from heaven, sent by the Father, to reveal these things. The people will someday look up and see and believe.*

*Remember the old story Nicodemus, the one about Moses lifting up a bronze snake high on a pole for the people in the wilderness? Those that were about to die gazed upon it and they lived again. It is the same with me. I will be lifted up that all may see and one day believe, and live. You look even more confuse my friend. It will soon be dawn. You will probably want to go soon. Share a bite of bread with me before you go, and let me say what I Am sent to say. It goes like this:*

*The Father loves his world so much that he came to it through me and gave of himself so everyone could come to believe and live well, forever. Nicodemus my friend, you have seen and now know what God has truly given the world. You have a new Spirit within you; your life is made new. Now go in peace to love and tell others as you can, when you feel ready. Our God will watch over your going out and your coming in.”*

Nicodemus went on to make other very risky public displays of evangelism. Doing so may have cost him everything, maybe even his life. We don’t know what became of him.

He next appears in scripture at John 7:50, as the high court discusses ways to get rid of Jesus. Nicodemus raises the question of justice before them saying, *“is it legal to convict a man before he is given a hearing?”* His objection was overruled, but he had spoken up, *publicly*, on behalf of Jesus, proof of his continuing new-life conversion in what he had heard from Jesus. The last mention of Nicodemus comes as he joins Joseph of Arimathea in asking for Jesus body in order to provide the burial of his earthly body (John 19:39).

I believe there is some point in time in all our lives when we realize we are not what and who we think we are: fully and only of this world, water and flesh but nothing else. There comes a time when one is renewed, re-birthed, “born from above” and the Spirit prevails in ones daily doings.

Whether it’s a sign with a verse reference lifted up for many to see, a blinding flash of light, a near death experience, a hit on the head, or one just becomes exhausted of

the ways of this world; the Spirit is still blowing where and when it chooses and the people will hear it: one, by one, by one.

It will find us.....even in the dark. We are never out of reach.